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ABSTRACT

This document contains four symposium papers on linking human resource development (HRD) theory and practice. "Partnership Research: Ensuring More Useful HRD Collaborations" (Ronald L. Jacobs), which proceeds from the premise that most HRD research has limited impact on practice because research problems are usually generated devoid of a practice context, presents a process for conducting partnership research and examines five issues in conducing partnership research. "A Discussion of the Methodological Appropriateness of Research Represented in the AHRD (Academy of Human Resource Development) Proceedings--A Strategic Perspective for Journey Management" (Christopher R. Hardy) is a meta-study intended to provoke thought and debate regarding the strategic needs and future of HRD. In "Theory in 'Theory to Practice': Voices of Practitioners" (Wendy E.A. Ruona), a descriptive qualitative approach is used to describe and examine the experience of HRD practitioners in applying theory to practice. "The Status of HRD Research Literature in 1997" (Judith A. Hixon, Timothy R. McClernon) demonstrates that the overall rate of publication of HRD articles in journals from a broad cross-section of related fields has increased and measurable shifts have occurred in the types of studies being conducted and methodologies being used. (MN)

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29 **Linking HRD Practice and Research**

Chair: C. Ken Weidner, II, Loyola University Chicago

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Judy A. Hixon, Oklahoma State University

Timothy R. McClernon, People Architects, Inc.

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R Jacobs L Ruona
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Partnership Research: Ensuring More Useful HRD Collaborations

Ronald L. Jacobs
The Ohio State University

This paper addresses the question of how to bring HRD research closer to practice through partnership research. It is argued that most HRD research has limited impact on practice because research problems are usually generated devoid of a practice context, which is a clearly undesirable situation. The paper presents the need for partnership research, a process for doing partnership research, examples of partnership research studies, and issues in doing partnership research.

Keywords: Research, Partnership, Collaboration

This paper focuses on making HRD collaborations between researchers and practitioners more useful through partnership research. Usefulness here means that the collaboration achieved the dual goals of addressing both an immediate organizational problem and extending the bodies of knowledge that support the HRD field. From this perspective, partnership research has importance to all segments of the HRD community, but it has particular importance to those HRD researchers and reflective practitioners who seek to work together to help improve practice, which is the ultimate test of the research. Simply put, effective practice depends on rigorous research. Partnership research is defined as the process of improving HRD practice through research (Jacobs, 1996; 1997). Numerous studies have been reported in the literature that can be classified as being examples of partnership research, including Jacobs and Moore (1998), Jacobs, Jones, and Neil (1992), Jacobs and McGiffin, (1987), among others. However, partnership research remains an emerging concept in the HRD field.

This paper has four major purposes: 1) discuss the need for considering partnership research, 2) describe a process for doing partnership research, 3) discuss examples of partnership research projects, and, 4) discuss issues related to doing partnership research.

The Need for Partnership Research

HRD research is now close to its limits in terms of influencing practice. In spite of increased research activity in the field, few advances in practice have been grounded in research. Previous authors have generally sought to address this issue by emphasizing the importance of integrating HRD research and practice (Leimbach & Baldwin, 1997) and reminding us of the need to have practice become more theory-based (Swanson, 1996), information which was clearly needed at the time. Yet, there is a lack of specific guidance on how to change the present situation. To some observers, the issue is not whether there are sufficient numbers of collaborations between HRD researchers and practitioners. Indeed, many examples of such collaborations can be found both those reported in the HRD literature and those described by HRD graduate programs. Rather, the issue focuses on the nature of most HRD collaborations. That is, merely having researchers and practitioners work together on projects does not necessarily ensure that both scholarly and practical contributions will result from the effort. As such, there is a need to consider alternate approaches to HRD collaborations.

As stated, partnership research seeks to improve practice through research. Underlying partnership research is the principle that practice will be enhanced when it is based on rigorous research. But, that research should be linked back to the practice. Thus, the present research-to-practice model seems largely inadequate and incomplete. Under this approach, too much research, especially dissertation research, is conducted devoid of a practice context at the beginning. The data may have been gathered in an organizational setting, but the research has little or no meaning back to that organization. The organization often exists as a matter of convenience to gather the data, not as an equal partner in the process. Instead, partnership research suggests a practice-to research-to practice model. The research comes from practice, and the results are directed back to practice. To be clear, partnership research is not about any particular form of research, such as the paradigm, theory, or methods used. Nor is partnership research meant to supplant action research as a means to guide on-going practice. Rather, partnership research suggests that HRD practice should play a more prominent role in determining HRD research problems. In partnership research, HRD practice becomes antecedent to research, whereupon research problems are drawn from

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issues that arise in the practice setting, based on the interests of the researcher and, of course, on the needs of the organization. As a result, partnership research suggests shifting the emphasis for identifying research problems.

The literature on research in adult education and human resource development suggests that several sources of information might be used to identify research problems. Unfortunately, none of the references emphasize the one source of information that influences research the most, and becomes the ultimate recipient of the research, namely practice. For example, Merriam and Simpson (1995) include practice as one source of information in their discussions, but they give it no special treatment relative to the other sources. The point here is that practice should be viewed as the major source of information for identifying HRD research problems, such that practice becomes part of the research process. This may be true whether the HRD researcher is actually involved in the practice or is observing the practice firsthand. Unless the research problem is grounded more from practice at the onset, the research will unlikely have much relevance to the practice in the long run.

Partnership Research Process

Table 1 presents the various steps of the proposed partnership research process. The process assumes that researchers and practitioners come together, at least initially, to serve the practitioner's organization in some way. This assumption provides the practice context from which research problems can be subsequently identified. The process also assumes that each partner should have a stake in the outcomes of the collaboration, even as the outcomes change over the course of the collaboration.

Table 1. Partnership Research Process

1. HRD researcher seeks-out practitioner partners to meet academic, scholarly, and professional development goals. HRD practitioner seeks-out researcher partners to meet their organization's needs.
2. Contract negotiated to determine the outcomes of the HRD collaboration, including a statement that suggests the possibility of doing research as part of the collaboration.
3. Project context analyzed continuously to identify potential research problems, based on interests of the researchers and the perceived needs of the organization.
4. Value of the research problem confirmed through discussions with client and subsequent review of scholarly literature.
5. Contract renegotiated to include research as a committed activity of the collaboration, including a listing of expectations and outcomes of both researcher and practitioner.
6. Results disseminated based on contract expectations, such as: presentations to management, summary memos, manuscripts for publication, or dissertations.
7. Implications of the research are synthesized and its usefulness determined for the organization and for the field as a whole.

The process shows that HRD researchers and practitioners have different reasons for wanting to engage in collaborations. Clearly, anyone who has attempted to do R&D in organizational settings knows this statement to be true. Indeed, the underlying goal of most HRD researchers is to generate information that adds to, disputes, or in some way contributes to HRD theory and practice. That is, the goal is to identify principles that apply to similar instances of HRD practice, such as, say, finding out the critical factors to consider when designing organizational mentoring programs. At the same time, the practitioner's goal is to generate information that helps solve an immediate problem or brings additional insight onto an issue, which enables someone to make a decision.

From the initial contacts, a contract is usually negotiated specifying the nature of the collaboration. In reality, few HRD collaborations ever start out as a research project from the beginning. However, the possibility of doing

research later on -- under certain mutually agreeable conditions – should be specified in the contract. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the process is the step whereby the researcher continuously looks out for research opportunities and generates research problems from the opportunities. How to extrapolate a research problem from a practice context remains somewhat subjective, since researchers will likely look for different cues, based on their own scholarly interests. The research problem should be confirmed with the practitioner, since the practitioner should value the results as much as the researcher. In other words, the practitioner should know at the beginning the planned use of the results.

In the best case, the dissemination of the results should be a shared activity. That is, the researcher and practitioner should each support each other in accomplishing their outcomes. Yet, perhaps the most crucial step in the partnership research process is the final one, in which the implications of the research are derived for the benefit of practice. For the researcher, the challenge becomes how to translate the results of one study, or a series of similar studies, into useable principles for practice. For the practitioner, the challenge becomes how to change present practice in response to the research. Case studies have been helpful tools in both instances.

In truth, the proposed process represents a synthesis of the author's own experiences in developing HRD collaborations, not necessarily the ones that all researchers will experience. As a result, parts of the process will likely differ as collaboration opportunities differ.

Examples of Partnership Research

To be certain, no generally accepted criteria exist for identifying partnership research. Thus, following five criteria were drawn from the partnership research process, including: 1) the research study emerged from an on-going HRD collaboration; 2) both partners in the collaboration perceived the research problem to have value when the research was proposed; 3) the research was conducted parallel to the other activities of the collaboration; 4) both partners achieved at least some of their expected outcomes for the research; and, 5) attempts have been made to move the results from the immediate setting. Table 2 summarizes five case studies that have been determined to meet these criteria.

In truth, not all the examples meet the five criteria to the same extent. However, the purpose of presenting the examples is to show the range and nature of potential research projects.

Issues for Doing Partnership Research

Clearly, doing partnership research adds another level of complexity to an already difficult process, namely the research process. Yet, if the HRD field is to continue to provide benefits to organizations and individuals as promised, then research must have greater influence on practice. And partnership research seems instrumental for achieving that goal. Thus, the added difficulty caused by partnership research seems unavoidable.

Five issues seem important to discuss related to doing partnership research. First, there is the observation that not all attempts at partnership research are successful. Indeed, partnership research is not always successful, even when both partners make all efforts otherwise. At one level, success depends on the level of trust and respect between the partners. Even so, there is always the possibility that a suitable research study simply cannot be found within the practice context. Certainly, HRD collaborations cannot be judged in terms of their research productivity alone. But, there is no doubt that partnership research involves greater risk, especially for the HRD researcher who is investing resources with that promise in mind.

Second, there is the need for researchers to be more careful in selecting their practitioner partners. In a sense, good HRD collaborations may occur when the practitioner knows something about research. Those practitioner who have virtually no experience with research may not be a good choice in all instances. In fact, some inexperienced practitioners may agree to become involved in research, but in fact have little knowledge and the imposition this may make on their organizations. Third, as noted, the most difficult part of the partnership research process is extrapolating research problems from the practice context. Some HRD researchers apparently have skills to do this with some degree of success. However, the skill has not yet been systematically analyzed, assuming that the skill can be successfully analyzed, and then taught to others, perhaps during graduate courses in research. At best, extrapolating research from practice remains a worth notion, with uncertain behavioral components.

Fourth, there is the issue of maintaining the commitment to the other partner's outcomes, even when one set of outcomes has been accomplished. As stated, partnership research assumes that effective practice depends on

rigorous research. Yet, it is the fulfillment of the outcomes that ultimately gives partnership research its potential power to influence practice. If the respective outcomes are not achieved for each partner, then the collaboration cannot be judged as a success. In truth, however, there is the natural tendency for one partner or the other to leave the collaboration prematurely.

Finally, there is the issue of the proper relationship between researchers and practice. It is suggested that HRD researchers know practice better or at least seek to become more accomplished practitioners themselves if they are not already. Paradoxically, if HRD researchers are not effective as practitioners, then it is possible that their own research opportunities will be affected detrimentally. In effect, HRD researchers must view their own research agenda as being linked with the various practice opportunities that they take on. Research agendas may be influenced and guided by practice, as much as practice influences and guides research.

Conclusion

This paper introduces partnership research as a point of discussion among HRD researchers. The need to consider partnership research is based on the need to have research and practice become more dependent upon each other. Merely encouraging groups of researchers and practitioners to recognize this need does not seem sufficient for change. Partnership research represents an approach to that alters how researchers and practitioners collaborate together, for the broader purpose of improving the contributions of the HRD field as a whole.

Table 2. Partnership Research Examples

Organization	*Purpose of Collaboration*	*Organization Question*	*Research Problem*	*Outcomes*
International Recruiting Organization	Evaluate distance training program	Which version is more effective for training newly-hired recruitment specialists?	What is the relationship between the two training versions system and performance?	• Dissertation • Research funding • Evaluation report
Kenworth Truck Company	Design and implement structured OJT system	How do we justify the cost of using structured OJT?	What are the financial benefits of unstructured and structured OJT?	• Report • Presentation • Policy change • *HRDQ* article • Research agenda
Thomson Electronics	Help design new-hire selection process	Is the process valid?	Compare the effectiveness of two selection approaches: group vs. individual?	• Report • AHRD paper • Manuscript submitted
Huntington National Bank	Analyze existing data from commercial culture survey	What other results can be found in the survey?	Does involvement in employee development programs differ across managers?	• Management review • AHRD paper • Dissertation • *HRDQ* Forum article
Delphi Systems	Help implement self-managed work groups	How to become more competitive?	Is there a valid process for identifying the development needs of frontline employees?	• Change policy • Presentation • Book chapter

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A Discussion of the Methodological Appropriateness of Research Represented in the AHRD Proceedings - A Strategic Perspective For Journey Management

Christopher R. Hardy
INNOLOG, Inc.

The intent of this meta - study was to examine the methodological appropriateness of the types of research represented in the 1997 and 1998 AHRD Proceedings. It was intended to provoke thought and debate in regard to the strategic needs of HRD and could be useful in a reflective critique of ourselves, our institutions, our body of knowledge, and where we are going (journey management).

Keywords: Research Methods, Meta-Study, Strategic

Theoretical Framework and Expectations

Toward contributing to the academy's mission of *leading HRD through research*, the intent of this descriptive study was to examine the types of research as represented in the 1997 and 1998 AHRD Proceedings and the implications to the field from a strategic perspective. By presenting this analysis at the conference, I hope to provoke a scholarly debate, discussion, and dialogue as to the relative merits and appropriateness of the alignment with the general needs of the field. Additionally, to help frame the results of this study I constructed a general life cycle meta-research model collectively derived from Kerlinger (1986), Isaac & Michael (1990), Best & Kahn (1989), and Nunnally & Bernstein (1994). I used this strategic level construct for my assessment and evaluation of the results of this study (Figure 1).

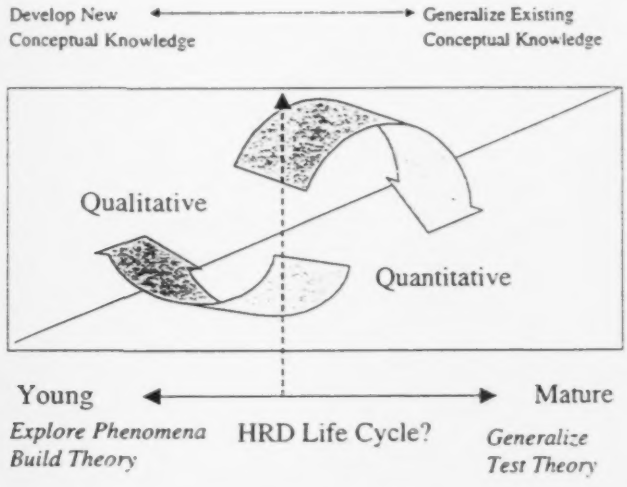

Figure 1. HRD Research Assessment and Life Cycle Model.

Research is a process of reflective inquiry; its components, *qualitative and quantitative*, are not mutually exclusive but can be viewed as inter-dependent (Best & Kahn, 1989 and Kerlinger, 1986). For example, qualitative research methods are helpful in developing new conceptual theory and better understanding the relevant aspects of

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the social realities involved; quantitative methods can then be used to test and generalize this conceptualized theory, but the generalized results can in turn drive the need for further development of theory which to be employed must again be tested. This qualitative/quantitative linkage portrays one aspect of their interactivity and inter-dependency. Additionally, hybrid designs (utilizing the strengths of both types) can supplement and compliment the strength of design and the general robustness of the findings. But even in a hybrid study, ultimate usefulness is dependent on the comparative relationships (or lack) of the results, the researcher's conclusions, and its contribution to the body of knowledge. To fulfill the complete needs of a field, one must develop theory and test (evaluate, validate, and generalize) theory. Though not exclusively so, qualitative and quantitative research designs generally tend, due to their relative strengths and weaknesses, to functionally align their general utilities to theory and test, respectively. We need them both to complete a line of research.

But if one takes a strategic view of the proportional amount each method is being applied across our field and their aggregate, methodological appropriateness, a useful benchmark is the relative maturity of HRD as a discipline. In this regard, a mature field of study and practice with well established theoretical bases would tend to generate an aggregate balance of both types of research or maybe even an over-representation of quantitative studies to help test, evaluate, and generalize established theory linking it to practice. On the other hand a relatively young discipline, as psychology was in the early 1900's, would probably expend the majority of its collective energy developing a body of theory. If HRD is considered a fairly new discipline, I would expect to find more qualitative than quantitative methods being used in a general survey of the field. However, if I accept Gilley & Eggland's (1989) assessment and characterization of HRD as an emerging forty year old multi- discipline, I would place HRD somewhere in the early middle of figure 1 above and its depiction of HRD's relative life cycle. As such, I would expect a relative balance of the types of research methods depicted on the model.

I could go on to posit that even if considered a relatively new field, many of HRD's theoretical frameworks have strong and pronounced historical and/or parallel threads from other disciplines. As a result, much of HRD's theoretical bases are derived. (Figure 2).

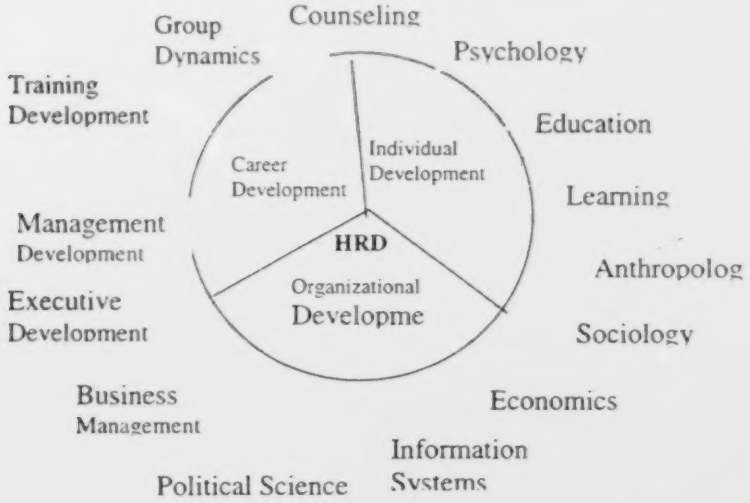


Figure 2. HRD's historical and parallel threads.

But from a maturation perspective, many recent HRD theories are not new, but only new within the context of considering the human capital issues driven by new business and learning challenges brought about by the information age with its profound implications on our societal and business processes and systems. The same wine (s), different bottle and label (and perhaps different combinations, distillations and consumptions). However, HRD still can be viewed as unique -- due to the integration of these threads into the fabric of our theories and practice.

In order to make a value judgement (for this study) as to relative appropriateness to the field, the articles published in the 1997 and 1998 AHRD Proceedings were categorized demographically and by general method of research. I believe that these articles are representative of and reflect the relative currency of thought and research being generated by our institutions, organizations, students, faculty, and practitioner. Previously, others have attempted to explore the typography of research appearing in earlier AHRD proceedings measuring the appropriateness to the needs of the field. Arnold (1996) conducted an earlier study of the 1994 and 1995 Proceedings and found a majority were descriptive in nature. As a follow-on supplement, van Hooff and Mulder (1997) continued the intent, but deviated in focus using research formats instead of methods for categories for the year 1996. However, both of these earlier studies did recommend additional longitudinal research should continue in the assessment of the methodological appropriateness of the types of research being generated by the Academy (Arnold, 1996; van Hooff & Mulder, 1997). My current study adds to their efforts, but more deliberately focuses upon the broad generalizations of *qualitative and quantitative* as a scale of methodological appropriateness in comparison with the longitudinal needs of HRD. These general categories, qualitative and quantitative depicted in figure 3 below, I found could be used to estimate the possible relationships between the relative life cycle of a discipline and the products of its endeavors. Though precise conclusions are not argued (nor advocated), this life cycle framework could be useful in a critique of ourselves, our institutions, our body of knowledge, and where we are going (journey management). *Finally I believe that, from a strategic perspective, the how determines the what or the* methodological appropriateness helps define and is irrevocably linked to the results.

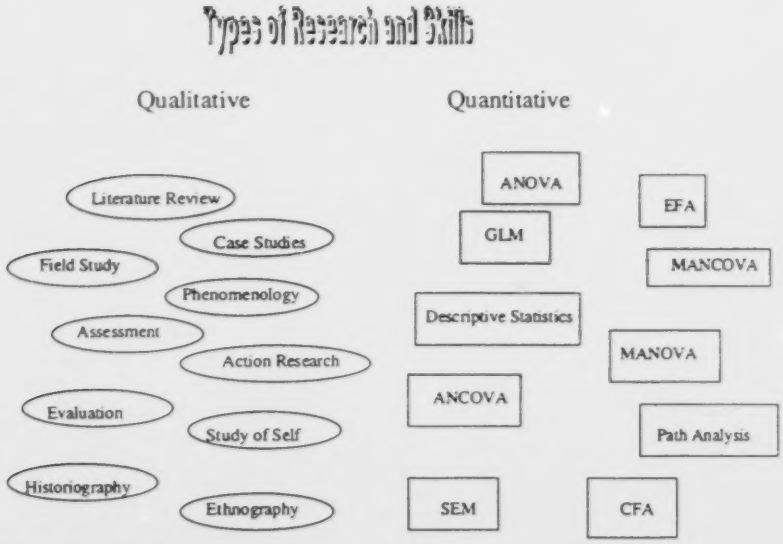


Figure 3. Types of research and skills.

Questions For Investigation

This study focused on the type(s) of research as characterized and grouped above and represented in recent (1997 and 1998) conference proceedings. From a strategic perspective, it questioned the proportional methodological appropriateness. The following research questions provoked this study:

1. Is the distribution of the types of research represented in the AHRD adequate and appropriate for our strategic needs?
2. If these results of this study can be generalized, what are the implications to the future of HRD as a body of knowledge and practice?

Method

Though Arnold (1996) analyzed 1994 and 1995 data, I felt that the last two years of research papers published in the proceeding would be a more stable and valid sample from which to base further inquiry and dialogue. As a early member of the AHRD, I have witnessed a marked improvement in the quality and the scholarship in the proceedings. Because of this apparent positive trend, I felt more comfortable with the representativeness of the data for 1997 and 1998. However, van Hooff & Mulder's (1997) results (123 papers) derived from the 1996 proceedings were useful for comparison.

Sample and Design. I examined and analyzed 241 papers - samples of 117 from the 1997 and 124 from the 1998 AHRD proceedings. Additionally, I compared results from van Hooff and Mulder (1997) derived from an additional 123 papers - totaling 364 representing the last three years.

Data (paper) categorization. The overarching categories of Qualitative and Quantitative were used to define and describe types of research. Figure 3 above depicts the relative groupings of research characteristics and methods comprising the two general categories. Papers were reviewed and sorted by research categories and selected demographics. Analyses were conducted using constructed visual representations of the relative distributions and descriptive statistics. The following target variables (Figure 4) were used in data collection and subsequent analyses:

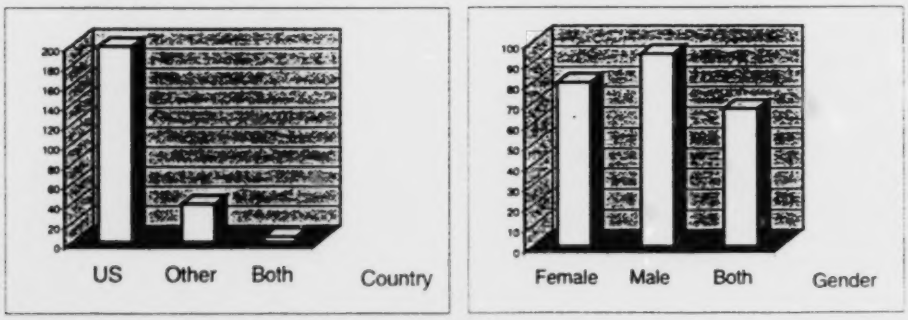
- Gender:	Female or Male or Both (Team)
- Sponsoring Agency:	Academic or Industry or Both
- Intended Focus Area:	Theory or Practice
- Country:	US or International or Both
- Type of Research:	Qualitative, Quantitative, Both, Multivariate

Figure 4. Research variables. Multivariate research papers were submitted by only 5 institutions represented at the AHRD.

Coding and Distributions. When apparent variable codings were determined as proclaimed within the research design of the majority of the papers. It should be noted however that I liberally coded quantitative or both when observing any quantification in the papers. A coding of multivariate research was more stringently awarded consistent with Tabachnick and Fidell (1989). Demographics of gender were determined by gender apparent first name (this procedure could of course create some error in the gender specific results). Other categories of research focus and national representation were also somewhat subjective judgements. Sponsoring agency category, academic or industry , was coded as stated in the individual paper reviewed. Frequency distributions were used.

Results

Results were graphically compared to the constructed life cycle research model. The 1997 – 1998 proceedings



yielded the following distributions in figures 5, 6, and 7.

Figure 5. Country and gender demographics. Most of the papers were predominantly from the United States, some 196 vs. 38 from other countries. The break out by gender was relatively balanced (80 Female, 94 male, and 67 both).

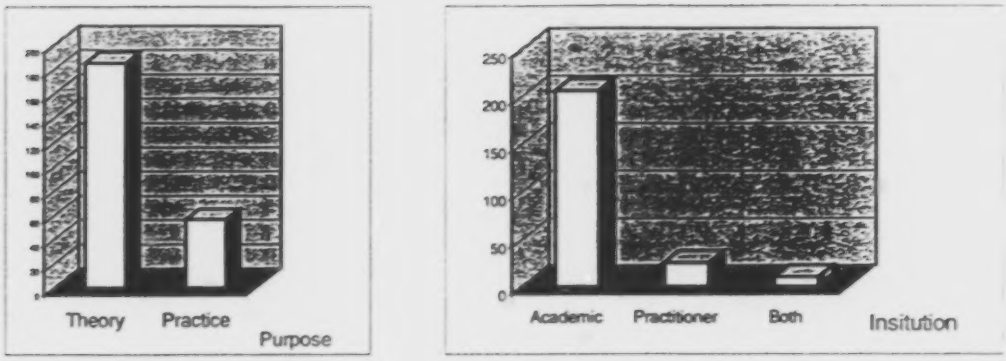
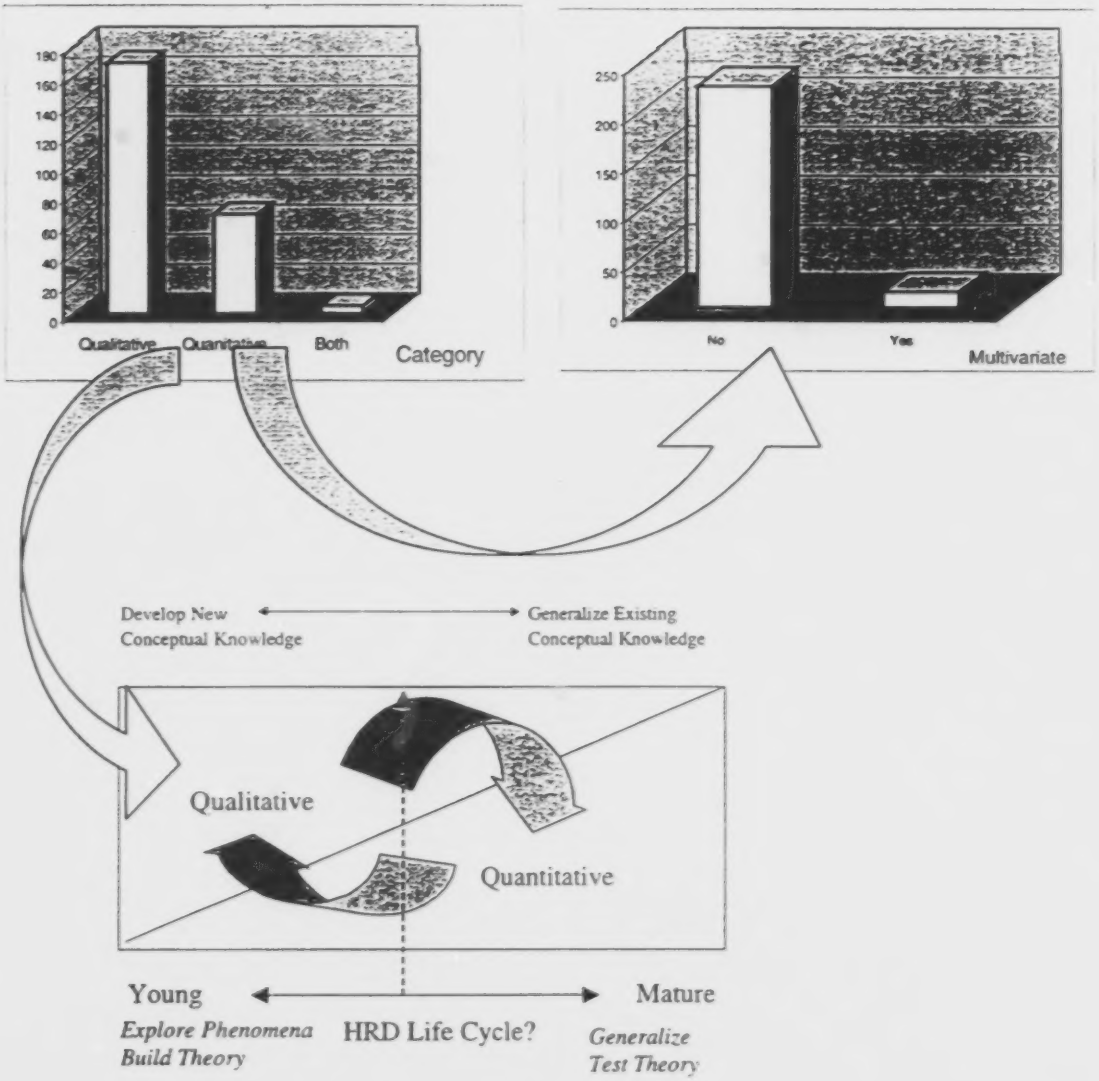


Figure 6. Research purpose and represented institution.



Maturation of HRD's Body of Knowledge
Appropriate Types of Research and the Needs of the Field

Figure 7. Results In regard to types of research.

The majority of the papers above were qualitative (169 versus 67 quantitative). Of the 241 total and 67 quantitative, only 16 were multivariate in design.

The orientation of most of the Papers focused more on theory than practice (185 theory and 56 practice). Institutions represented were academic verses industry/practitioner (206 to 25 - with 10 as partnerships between academia and industry).

Discussion In Regard to the Limitations of the Study, its Implications for Human Resource Development, and the Important Questions Remaining.

In this study (and in van Hooff & Mulder's, et. al.), there was a pronounced preference evident for qualitative methods of research. If these results reflect the research interests and products for our field, then an inordinate level of effort, resources, and investment are expended using qualitative methods. This could suggest that HRD needs to define itself and develop its theory and body of knowledge. This overrepresentation of qualitative methods could be interpreted as a fulfillment of the strategic need for intensive studies of background, current status, and environmental interactions of given social units, individuals, groups, institutions, or communities to better understand the social realities characterized by the emergence of a relatively new discipline (Issac & Michael, 1990; Kerlinger, 1986). Even if relatively new as some will argue (McLean, 1998) - though others will counter citing the abundant historic theoretical threads from education, psychology, organizational development, group dynamics, adult education, and business processes and management literatures, HRD as a forty year old discipline would benefit from a more balanced level of effort and research (Gilley & Eggland, 1989). More methodologically balanced research methods would allow for the generalization and operationalization of theory. Only then can we effectively deploy and link theory to practice (I would hope that we are not so much in our infancy that we need to continuously develop an endless stream of tentative hypotheses after tentative hypotheses for others to test at some future date). Additionally, advocating more quantitative research studies, especially multivariate analyses – *only 16 in two years of proceedings from five of our major institutions*, are methodological appropriate to push the field from theory to practice (and provoke subsequent follow-on inquiry - both qualitative and quantitative). We need both methods in abundance to address the full needs of HRD as a unique discipline.

Gary McLean, Editor for the HRDQ, indirectly summarized my own stance, though not deliberately, on this issue, "*Every academic field is marked by its literature*...the field of human resource development...has been well served with quality, practitioner-oriented journals an newsletters. The same can not be said of the scholarly or academic literature available to members to the profession"...he goes on to say that this situation is changing partly due to the publication of the HRDQ (McLean, 1998, p. 23-1). Strategically, an over-representation of either qualitative or quantitative methods (and the relative absence of multivariate methods) should raise a concern, unless the true needs of the field being targeted are based on some compelling rationale that demands the majority of our attention and efforts. The real question, not answered in this study but provoked by the overrepresentation of qualitative research methods used in the Proceedings, is why?

- ✓ Is HRD, as a young discipline, still lacking enough stable theoretical frameworks which would largely promote and require more qualitative developmental inquiries in a quest for definition?
- ✓ Are we still too early in our development as a discipline to generalize to the population and leverage our collective theoretical knowledge?
- ✓ Are we as a population of scholars and practitioners more interested in qualitative pursuits and generally adverse to statistics, quantification, and analytical methods?
- ✓ Do our research questions really drive our research methods or are there other reasons why HRD is overrepresented by qualitative research products and methods?
- ✓ Is there something in our cognitive style preference makeup that pre-determines our general bias toward more subjective vice analytic inquiry?
- ✓ Do we recruit faculty at our institutions with predominantly qualitative interests, backgrounds, and abilities... do we clone ourselves?
- ✓ Why do our graduate students gravitate within our programs to qualitative methods?

- ✓ Do our HRD faculty, graduate students and field practitioners have the requisite quantitative, multivariate research skills to fully test and evaluate theory?
- ✓ And finally, what individual and institutional strategies would be necessary to balance this alleged methodological inappropriateness?

Of course, the questions raised by this study are based on the assumption that the accepted papers within the 1997 and 1998 AHRD proceedings are representative in quantity and quality in regard to the distribution of research being conducted in the larger domain of HRD. However, the results of this study could provide useful insight for a brief reflective critique of our academy and the field in general, especially if viewed from a strategic perspective. If these distributions are truly representative of our field and interests when compared to the relative life cycle of HRD, it would be prudent to question the methodological appropriateness of the majority of our intellectual endeavors and investments. We must look at ourselves, our institutions, our policies, our faculties, interests and expertise, historical theoretical threads, and the relative needs of our body of knowledge – by seeking these answers we (the AHRD) may manage our journey.

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Theory in "Theory to Practice": Voices of Practitioners

Wendy E.A. Ruona
University of Minnesota

Theory-to-practice is a prominent issue that is certain to affect the future success of HRD. Although many are discussing the topic, it has yet to be studied in any systematic way. A critical step in progressing on this issue is to further understand practitioners' views on theory in their HRD work. The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experience of HRD practitioners in applying theory to practice using a descriptive qualitative approach.

Keywords: Theory-to-Practice, Qualitative Research

Human Resource Development is an applied field. Therein lies one of its most beneficial strengths and its most haunting threat. The field is driven by its practice—the interventions that are being implemented throughout organizations today. However, practice has remained the driver even as HRD's theory-base increases. Today, practice is increasingly criticized for not using theory to improve its effectiveness and for, in turn, producing shoddy interventions, fads, and unsubstantiated psuedotheories (Swanson, 1997). On the other hand, practitioners continue to criticize scholars for being disconnected from their challenges, slow in producing theory, and misdirected in the issues they address.

This issue has been increasingly discussed in HRD during the past few years. In fact, it is noteworthy that *Human Resource Development Quarterly* had an editorial on the topic once during each of the last four years (Watkins, 1994; McLean, 1995; Jacobs, 1996; Swanson, 1997) and the topic took center stage at the 1997 Academy of Human Resource Development.

Although there are quite a few key people discussing the topic, the issue has yet to be studied in any systematic way. Those who are discussing it speak from their guts, informed opinions, and informal polls of their networks. While this is valuable, it does not constitute "formal inquiry that helps us to understand and explain the meaning" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5) of the phenomena of interest.

Research and practice must be linked to ensure a stronger foundation on which the field can strengthen and be more successful in achieving its goals. It is possible that HRD professionals need new models on which to build a solid research and practice partnership. Carr and Kemmis (1986) urge us to take a praxiological view of theory and practice—meaning that theory does not stand alone only to inform practice. Rather, they are dialectically related. "They are to be understood as mutually constitutive, as in a process of interaction which is a continual reconstruction of thought and action" (p. 34). A critical step in fostering this view in HRD professionals—practitioners as well as theoreticians—is to further understand practitioners' views on theory in their HRD work.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experience of HRD practitioners in applying theory to practice in HRD using a descriptive qualitative approach. Specifically, this study was an effort to begin to uncover how theory and practice in HRD integrate and serve one another. To do so, this inquiry sought to understand the experience of practitioners using theory in their interventions and work. Three areas comprised the focus of the inquiry: (1) practitioners' impressions of research and theory, (2) the benefits and barriers of using theory in practice, and (3) what things are needed to enhance the theory and practice relationship (in HRD practice).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach with the intent to describe and interpret. This method provides a way to more fully probe the thoughts and perceptions of HRD practitioners as they relate to theory. The goal was to inquire into their opinions, hear their stories and experiences using theory in their work, and to gain some insight into the "real" world that they live in and that academics are so often critiqued for not understanding.

Five participants were selected and all were willing to describe their knowledge and experience with theory and practice. The participants were purposively chosen to foster some diversity of perspective, while still meeting a set of criteria for inclusion in the study (Patton, 1990). All participants were chosen based on these following criteria: (a) advanced degree in HRD or extensive experience in HRD, (b) active work in field of HRD for at least 5 years,

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(c) involved in HRD work at organization(s) of over 300 people or in external consulting firms, and (d) held a position that involves a breadth of HRD work (training, OD, etc...). Three females and two males participated.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant after they had agreed to participate in the study. Each participant received a copy of 3-5 key questions that could serve as the basis for our discussion, although it was made clear that these questions would serve as only one basis for the interview. Each participant was prompted to reflect on, and raise, any issues they wanted to discuss about theory and practice in HRD. The interviews lasted approximately 1-1½ hours and were tape recorded while the researcher also took brief notes.

Analysis

Content analysis, analytic deduction, and a small degree of constant comparative method across subjects' responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were employed during analysis. The interviews and interview notes were transcribed by the researcher soon after each was conducted. All transcriptions were sorted into tables that allowed for an initial sorting and coding into key themes being discussed during the interviews. After this initial sorting, the text of each interview was studied in-depth. Key quotes, examples, and stories that were particularly poignant or demonstrative of emerging themes were highlighted and color-coded. Finally, "organizer sheets" were created on a computer to assist in organizing categories of key themes that had emerged with supporting highlighted text. This was a recursive process of organizing and reorganizing information as more interviews were conducted and the researcher's understanding of the issues increased. To ensure some "dependability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 288) of the results obtained from this data, a professor with extensive experience in qualitative research as well as a colleague were consulted to audit the trail of the research and authenticate that the results were consistent with the data collected.

Results

While three areas comprised the focus of the inquiry, a number of themes emerged. Ultimately, these were organized into four primary categories: (1) participants understanding of theory and research, (2) information about how participants judge the rigor of theory and research, (3) the perceived value of theory and research (at the individual and organizational levels), and (4) barriers and challenges in using theory in practice.

What is Theory and Research?

A basic understanding of what theory is and isn't represented a large area of ambiguity. This ambiguity was most powerfully expressed by one participant on a voice mail message as she was preparing for our interview (and later in the interview). She stated the following:

> What do you mean by theory in theory and practice? I think theory...do I operate from theory? Do you mean models? I thought of David Ulrich and the four roles of HRD...that's a model and I can see the quadrants and his components. Do you mean things like data...because when I'm working on the performance management and people rate themselves low I know to expect it because data shows that in a participative environment people are hard on themselves? So is that using theory? I don't know. Then, I think about theory and in school they say we should be doing something a certain way and is that theory? So data, advice, and models are three things I think of when I think of theory. What about best practices...is that a theory? How about trends of the day?

Practitioners interviewed for this study varied in their notions of what theory was, however most agreed that it was some sort of conceptual organizer or a model—visually memorable and model-like.

Practitioners interviewed were rather clear about the differences between theory and research. Research was thought of in terms of results. One participant stated that "research is the process to get at something" and another saw research as "validating theory—that's what I look for. When I say 'does this theory have some research behind it and what did the research show.'" Another participant echoed this response when he said:

> Research is the process by which theory results. I would argue that theory is the output of collective research. I would see that many people could provide research and over a period of time a theory begins to emerge that was sufficiently sound and that people felt was safe to adapt and reflect on to use.

For another participant, theory and research were also inextricably wedded. He explained that:

> Theory would be some kind of model for doing something based on people's good thinking...that has no real basis except it sounds good (pull out people's ideas etc...). Research is the application of theory and practice (real application) where we actually start looking at does this model help us to predict. Does this model actually do anything to really aid in getting to the outcomes?

Judging the Rigor of Theory

Although these practitioners' definitions of research and theory were aligned with what many theoreticians might say, participants tended towards less rigorous criteria by which to judge the quality of a theory and research. Most academic definitions of theory and research include a rigorous process that meets specific standards, regardless of the mode of inquiry. Practitioners interviewed here, on the other hand, used a variety of techniques to sift through the barrage of theories and models they are faced with in their work. One person admitted that there is no "high and mighty practice that I can tell you, although I sort of wish I could." The strongest thing that practitioners interviewed relied on was their own intuition, values and beliefs. This is displayed in the following quotes from participants:

- I will use the theory and put it in the brain and think about how that relates to my own experiences. If it doesn't relate at all, I will probably not use it. If it related some, I will adapt it to my own experiences. Very rare that I would take it all on board and do it as the book says.
- It's got to have face validity. I've got to know in my bones that this makes sense. Although I'm willing to read, some of these ideas sound crazy. But if the data and results are there I have to say "let me think about this a minute."

Most of the practitioners interviewed were also aware of the limitations of their intuition:

- Yes, but I'm also saying to myself that a lot of that (intuition) is based only on my experience. The theory has to overcome the intuition in some cases....my intuition is affected by built in biases.
- That said, there are certain times when now and again I'll read an article and say, "that isn't common sense to me because I've never thought about it that way." It's probably something that I haven't really thought about it, so I have to rely on something to produce some sort of response. Or, there's a level up from intuition...some sort of reflection....a sort of practicing theory that hasn't been tested out anywhere other than the fact that I've been through situations and I've then reflected on them and developed my own understanding of that.

Practitioners were proud of intuitive nature, and cognizant that their experience often lets them only grab on to things that corroborate with past experiences. Several of those interviewed recognized that they must work to keep their mind open to new ideas and theory—the ah ha's—and then possibly adjust their ideas and practice.

Practitioners interviewed wanted results, and use this criteria as central in screening theory. One person stated that she didn't "think of theory as something that somebody's proposing, but rather as something that someone's tried and can tell the results." Another said:

> The second strongest criteria by which we judge theory is who's doing it or who's saying it. I look at who's doing it and if they say Motorola is doing it and they have 238,000 employees and they seem to get a good response, I think, gosh, I should do what they're doing. So, if it's a Fortune 500 I kind of listen more. I look to see how long it has been around, what were the results.

This emphasis on "tried-and-true" results resonated throughout the interviews. One person stated that they know the model is sound "when it works." Another person described his process of evaluating the blockbuster hit books by Senge on systems thinking:

> Well, if people tried it and it worked, then it works. Whether he's done the due process on the academic side, I'm not going to make a deal about it. Go look, there is a bibliography, there are Ph.D. people who he is pulling from, he works at MIT, O.K. The point is that it's working.

Value of Theory and Research in Practice

Individual Value

The economist John Maynard Keynes (1936) reflected that "practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually slaves of some academic scribbler of a few years back." Although this divide between theory and practice seems to be a perennial issue dating back centuries, this quote reminds us that many practitioners find some degree of value in theory. This was underscored by the practitioners interviewed for this study. On an individual level, practitioners reflected that theory was necessary to "ground yourself in", thought it was something that could be counted on, and that it enhanced their credibility with their stakeholders. One person stated:

> To a certain extent it's about giving them some security in me. It gives me a certain amount of standing in their eyes. If I was to just put some recommendation in front of them and they turned around and asked me "why", then I would have more than my common sense way of doing it. Having the research allows me to cite when its been done, it provides me a safety net.

Practitioners interviewed for this study used theory and research to provide supporting evidence that what they are doing is right or to steer them in a direction. They also employed it to ensure consistency among their colleagues (especially within internal departments)—to "use shared models and theories so that regardless which one of us went into the problem we'd be using the most appropriate model or theory." In addition, most of those interviewed agreed that theory saves them time in their work. One person stated, "we're too busy doing it to think of how to do it. You can do your work or think and do your work, most of the time around here we just do our work. Theory helps us think *and* do our work."

Another distinct perceived benefit was the capacity of theory to question assumptions and mental models and force necessary reflection and thinking. One person expressed the need for theory to "prompt a discussion that enriches learning—to call into question some preconceived notions and foster exploration." Another woman stated that "theory gives me new eyes." Another individual described how theory pulls her into the future, "theory is often way out there and someone is pulling me towards something that I haven't thought of, towards a way of looking at things that I haven't thought of before."

Finally, a powerful theme that emerged from the interviewees was the role that theory can play in avoiding faddish and solely customer-focused practice that they perceived as typically ineffective and even dangerous. One person said:

> The people I have seen in practice are a grab bag, they don't have any conceptual models, what they have is a tool bag. With a tool bag, what you end up doing is bringing more and more baggage and pretty soon it's a suit case. With conceptual theory, it allows you to go with what you know and add as its necessary. For me to contribute at the business level, I need to be able to play business against not a bunch of tools, but play it against an integrated, theoretical base.

Another individual offered a powerful metaphor for this trend that he fights in his practice much of the time:

> We have to be customer-driven, but only to an extent. We can't listen to customers all the time. They come to us with their requests (those fads we all read about) and it's ridiculous! You know I don't go to a Doctor and tell them what's wrong with me and how to fix it. While we might do that to some extent, if the Doctor goes too far with our solution, we don't think that they are a competent doctor. That's what happens to HRD practitioners...we need to be customer sensitive but there's a limit if we want to maintain our competency and credibility.

Theory was viewed by most of those interviewed as beneficial towards achieving their goals of good practice.

Business Value

The business value of theory was not so heartily declared! Overall, clients and stakeholders of the HRD practitioners interviewed do not seem to value theory, and, in some cited cases, actually seem to disapprove of its

use in practice. This was exemplified in this statement from one participant who said, "I know my clients and they trust me to have expertise. However, use of theory can be over-delivery. There's always trade-offs between business specifics and clients needs and how I can enhance expertise or our solutions through tools and concepts." This was reiterated again when one participant blatantly stated that "they actually don't care a damn, they're much more interested in the 'is it going to work for me' than they are about the theory itself."

In this study, the value of using theory in practice was perceived at more the individual level than at the organizational level. One participant believed the use of theory was advantageous to organizations "because only by using the right theories and research that underpins them are they increasing their odds of actually getting success." However it was clear from many statements and examples provided by these study participants that organizations they work with trust that HRD professionals will have the knowledge to be effective and to use that expertise wisely.

Barriers

Of all the topics probed during interviews for this study, barriers to using theory in practice were undoubtedly the topic of most passion! Practitioners interviewed have all attempted to incorporate theory in to their work and have encountered many, many barriers that they were anxious to discuss.

Bad Reputation

One woman who works inside a rather traditional manufacturing company offered a story that, to her, epitomized the challenge she faces when using theory in her work:

> Theory often has, in my world, a bad connotation. The other day I was having a run-in because I suggested we pass around an 8-page booklet we put together to help the performance appraisal process be more effective....and it's based on some solid and well-respected theory. Nobody's got it! This woman I was talking with disagreed with my wanting to get it out to our managers. Why? As she stood up she said to me, "see you deal in theory and I deal in reality, and I have to clean up the messes you create."

Another practitioner interviewed for this study found that working under the guise of HRD and HRD theory was too limiting because of the reputation of each. He said, "I found myself spending more of my time selling, and convincing, and influencing. So I got out of HRD and got into business management." Then, he went on to cite examples of using very sound HRD theory cloaked in a different reputation that he felt had more respect.

Language

One significant component of the bad reputation discussed above was the language used in theory. It was unanimously and strongly critiqued for it's complicated wording and tone. One person stated that the language used in theory is "full of exclusivity and doesn't touch the human spirit." Another explained that most of the time his colleagues and employees don't even consult theory because of how complicated it is to read.

Another critique was that the talk of theory is not the lingo of business. The message from each of those interviewed is that HRD practitioners have got to speak the language of business better and speak theoretically less and less. An example was offered by one woman who recently read a proposal submitted by a colleague of her's. She said, "sometimes I read this psycho-babble stuff and I think this is just bunk! Anybody who reads this would say 'why are we paying you to do this?' It's spinning words. It was so disconnected from the world we live in."

Lack of Understanding Business and the Pace of Business

The language problem could be connected in some way to another major theme that emerged. The HRD practitioners interviewed clearly felt that theory was not connected to the demands placed on HRD practice. The problem, according to one participant, is "the slower-paced nature of academia." Academia was repeatedly criticized for not understanding the practicality of the problems out there, the need for solid, predictable outcomes/deliverables, and the pressure for application. For example, one practitioner explained:

> My problem is that someone will come to me with his issue and with my limited access to scholarly resources it can take 2-3 weeks to get the articles I want. The manager is not prepared to accept this delay! He will turn around and say 'stuff the research, let's just do it'. My cycle time to deal with problems is very short. I'm not saying that is right, but that's the reality of it.

One of the consultants stated that "business people need instantaneous application...if they don't see application within ½ hour they get upset—literally!" Furthermore, the problem is worsened by the lag time between when research gets conducted and when it gets published. McLean (1997) stated "by the time the research gets published (years), the best practice has evolved through real-time intuitive research, or the practice no longer fits the need" (p. 8). This was most certainly expressed by the practitioners involved in this study.

The Inadequacies of Theory and Research

Theory and research were critiqued in quite a few ways, too numerous to even discuss in-depth here. Table 1 provides some primary themes that emerged in this category, and just one, representative comment from the interviewees on the issue.

Table 1

Inadequacies of Theory and Research

Issue	Comment from HRD Practitioner
The "always something new phenomena"	"I don't care that it's not new. Use it enough that you can tell me that it really works. Creating it and testing it, not just spinning it. Prove to me that it works and that you're not just producing something new to get printed."
Too Micro	"Often that great thinking gets watered down when they start researching it. Research needs to be more macro, not so micro."
Focused on problems, not solutions	"Papers will endlessly look at the problem from a different angle. Meanwhile, no one comes out and says this is the solution. It's almost as if practitioners are expected to look at all these papers and come up with their own understanding...translate all this somehow...into something they can use themselves. I can understand why academics shouldn't be in the game of unbelievable or over-generalizable conclusions, but what practitioners really want is someone to say 'you should be doing it this way.' "
Assumes some level of pre-knowledge	"To really understand the issue you're reading about, you need another 20-25 articles that the one article cites. The articles tend to build on the existing understanding rather than saying that this is the existing and this is how it adds to it. Rather it says 'you will know from this author who wrote in 1992'), well most of the time I don't! As a practitioner it feels like I have to dig deeper and deeper to even begin to understand the issue."
Differing competence levels	"We've got a lot of senior trainers who floated up the training track and are now being told that they need to get out there and do some HRD consultancy work and they go out and all their training has been in delivery...they couldn't quote you 2 theories if you asked them. Every problem they see, they have to try to frame it in these two theories that they know. They would never think of going to do a literature review or of thinking around the subject."

Discussion

The goal of qualitative inquiry is to understand and interpret—to make things clearer—not to generalize. However, a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of just this small slice of the theory-and-practice issue offers much for HRD professionals to reflect on in terms of guiding future action. In this spirit, I have begun to reflect on some practical implications and encourage the reader to add their own reflections and scrutinize these preliminary ideas for thoughts that resonate with them.

Each component of the system bears some responsibility in addressing this theory and practice gap (McLean, 1997). Thus, there are implications that I see for both academia as well as for practitioners. Due to limited space available here, they are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

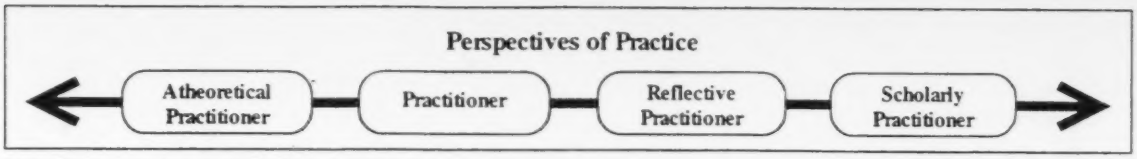
Recommendations for Improving Theory-to-Practice

Recommendations for academics	Recommendations for practitioners
• Refine definitions of theory and research. Identify and hold true to standards by which to judge theory and research. Teach practitioners this information!	• Acknowledge value of theory as well as its limitations.
• Create and provide practitioners more tools to reflect and critique their own practice.	• Increase knowledge and skills in understanding, judging, and using theory and research.
• Acknowledge the pressure practitioners face to apply and create positive results. Help them to meet and manage this endeavor.	• Work with your colleagues and others in your network to identify criteria by which to judge theory and research.
• Maintain a high-level of involvement in business and performance problems organizations face.	• Identify what theory and models you currently use in your work. Scrutinize them for soundness.
• Demonstrate the value of using theory in practice through case studies, articles, etc...	• Challenge yourself to consult at least three scholarly resources on the next HRD issue you face.
• Work with stakeholder groups to help them recognize the value of HRD theory/research.	• Contribute to theory by creating research opportunities in organization in which you work.
• Package theory/research in language and formats that cross boundaries of understanding and appeals to a wide variety of people.	• Partner with academics who are actively researching and engaging in partnership research.
• Check assumptions when writing-up results. Do you assume a level of pre-knowledge? Who is your audience? What is the relevance?	• Critically reflect on the HRD work you do. Use research/theory in that process.
• Align research agendas with practitioners, and undergo research with practitioners.	• Increase outlets for dissemination, as well as resources to consult
• Actively foster a "translator" role to specialize in translating research and theory into concepts and words practitioners can resonate to.	
• Increase outlets for dissemination.	

The final implication that I have reflected upon speaks directly to the issue of raising the standards of the profession. This must become a goal of *both* academics and practitioners. This idea actually came up in an interview with one of the participant's who commented that, "...there is no consequence for practitioners who don't use theory. The variables of successful practice are not linked to research/theory—they are about general intelligence, job experience, and personality." This cannot remain the norm if the gulf between theory and practice is to be bridged. The issue is about more than competence, although that certainly is a primary component. Watkins (1994) has written about "professionalizing" HRD and indicated an increasing need to ensure that HRD practitioners have education and qualifications to meet some minimum standards. However, she also called for a level of integrity and commitment to effectiveness that can be rooted in standards coming out of theory.

As a result of reflection and discussions I have had with the participants of this study as well as some of my colleagues, I have begun to envision a continuum on which practitioners can place themselves (or be placed) and that has helped me to reflect on this issue of setting and meeting standards in the profession. It is visually depicted and described in Figure 1. When I showed this framework to one of the participants of this study, he commented that what was key, then, was to:

> ...shift practitioners along that continuum. Once they are sold on being reflective practitioners and valuing theory and research the next obvious step is to become scholarly practitioners because then they are the people who start thinking "I can't reflect on this stuff because there's no theory to educate me on this so what can I do to fill that gap?"



Atheoretical Practitioner	This practitioner has very little grounding in theory, perhaps no relevant education credentials, or affiliation with professional associations. They lack knowledge of sound and credible resources and the skills to consult and interpret scholarly resources. Their practice "occurs without the guidance of theory" (Swanson, 1997, p. 4).
Practitioner	Practitioners that meet minimum standards of the profession. This role is characterized by a mastery of a common body of knowledge, a continual updating of one's knowledge, and a willingness to engage in dialogue" (Watkins, 1994, p. 296). Also central is the ability to strategically and effectively analyze/use scholarly resources and theory in practice as well as to "sell" theory to gain support of key stakeholders.
Reflective Practitioner	Practitioners who meet standards of the *Practitioner*, but also critically reflect on their practice and consult scholarly resources as a basis for improvement of their practice.
Scholarly Practitioner	Practitioners who meet the standards for both practitioner and reflective practitioner. These practitioners, however, are not only involved in using theory in their work but also contribute to it through research, publication in both refereed and non-referred journals, involvement in scholarly conferences etc... A key goal of this type of practitioner is the further development of the field of HRD.

Figure 1. Perspectives of practice.

Conclusion & Relevance to HRD

This paper represents a further exploration of the issue of theory and practice in HRD—from the voices of practitioners. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the HRD knowledgebase by moving beyond informal inquiries and informed opinions and conduct a formal inquiry to help us understand even more about the issue. In order to do this, the inquiry sought to understand the experience of practitioners using theory in their interventions and work. Three areas comprised the focus of this inquiry: (1) practitioner's impressions of research and theory, (2) the benefits and barriers of using theory in practice, and (3) what things are needed to enhance the theory and practice relationship.

I have attempted to offer some implications for HRD as a profession—both theoreticians and practitioners. The need to attend to this issue is only more potent as I draw to a close here. I am reminded of a powerful statement by a practitioner attempting to contribute to the narrowing of the gaps that exist between theory and practice:

> By definition, we are an applied science. Our theory development, processes, and success are derived from the relationship of HRD practice in organizations and the evidence that proves that the practice is sound and appropriate. Both practice and theory development are central to our discipline. As a result, we can ignore neither the art of application or the discipline of scientific rigor. (Leimbach, 1997, p. 13)

Indeed, in the words of one of the participant's interviewed for this case study, "each side is lop-sided. If you know enough, you know they're not complete without each other. So, theory and practice together make a whole."

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The Status of HRD Research Literature in 1997

Judith A. Hixon
Oklahoma State University

Timothy R. McClernon
People Architects, Inc.

Human Resource Development (HRD) provides purposeful, organized development of adult workers to improve individual, group, and organizational performance. As the field matures, the quality and scope of the literature becomes increasingly important in shaping the profession. This study provides a qualitative analysis of the number and characteristics of HRD research articles published in the year 1997, focusing on research methodologies, analytical and statistical tools, organizational participants, and types of journals. Previous studies by Sleezer and Sleezer (1997) and Arnold (1996) are used for comparative analysis and to establish trends. Our study showed an increase in the overall rate of publication of HRD articles in journals from a broad cross section of related fields. There have also been measurable shifts in the types of studies and methodologies. This study also points out the need for further literature research studies.

Keywords: Human Resource Development, Research Literature, Journal Publication

Human Resource Development (HRD) provides purposeful, organized development of adult workers to improve individual, group, and organizational performance. At the individual level, HRD enhances the growth of workers within the context of their jobs, career paths, group interactions and overall organizational structure. At the group and organizational level, HRD enhances and improves work processes, outputs and capacities for future performance. As HRD has matured as a profession, it has developed a specialized body of research. However, little has been written about the body of HRD research (Jacobs, 1990; Sleezer & Sleezer, 1997), and what has been written and published is often not in the hands of practitioners (Swanson, 1998 a). Because of the links between HRD subject matter and other fields such as psychology, systems theory, education, economics, and organizational behavior, HRD articles are often published in journals that target other specialties (Jacobs, 1990).

Earlier studies on HRD research literature were provided by Sleezer and Sleezer (1997) and Arnold (1996). Sleezer and Sleezer identified the core journals that published HRD research. They searched the citations available through the ERIC, ABI/Inform, and PsycLit electronic databases using search terms that reflected key elements from various HRD definitions. The researchers used specific criteria to identify HRD research articles published between 1980 and 1994 in refereed journals. For example, educational institutions were excluded, as were studies involving individuals not already in an organization and those concerning nonadults. This study identified 18 journals as core sources for HRD research on the basis that each journal had published at least 15 articles within the study period. The Sleezers noted that further research is needed in categorizing core journals and understanding the scope of the HRD field.

Arnold (1996) took a different approach to understanding the emerging HRD field. He looked at the publications from one acknowledged source, the Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings for 1994 and 1995. Arnold classified the articles based on the type of research and the tools used to explain the findings. Arnold divided the studies into categories as follows: 37 library research or speculative, 57 descriptive case or field study, 8 field or laboratory experiment, and 5 theoretical model or instrument construction. He then categorized each study based on whether the method of analysis was qualitative or quantitative. Of these, 58 were qualitative studies, while the 49 quantitative studies consisted of 41 descriptive case/field studies and 8 field/lab experiments. Arnold concluded that the community of HRD scholars leaned heavily toward library and speculative works, and posited that the field might be better served by increasing the amount of systematic and experimental research.

By systematically examining the HRD literature published in 1997, the present study builds on the Sleezers' and Arnold's work. First, we describe the methodology used in this study to identify, select, and analyze research articles. Then we present the results and implications based on the analysis.

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Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to gain insights about HRD research published in 1997. Accomplishing this aim involved surveying the literature, categorizing the articles, data interpretation and synthesizing conclusions. Each article included in the study was examined to determine (a) where the research article was published, (b) the context for the study, and (c) the methodology and tools used in conducting the study.

Surveying the Literature

Surveying the literature involved using a systematic process to identify articles relevant to a specific definition of HRD. The works which served as a basis for this study differed in their definitions; nevertheless, it was necessary to choose one in order to provide consistency in the selection and review of the articles. After considering various definitions, the authors settled on Swanson's (1998 b) definition, which follows:

HRD is a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organization development (OD) and personnel training and development (T&D) for the purpose of improving performance. The domains of performance include the organization, process, and individual levels. OD is a process of systematically implementing organizational change for the purpose of improving performance. T&D is the process of systematically developing expertise in individuals for the purpose of improving performance.

The criteria used to select the articles from all sources for this study were: (1) the article was published in a refereed journal during 1997; (2) it addressed the practical implications of some issue of relevance to the practice of workplace learning and performance; (3) the article was in English; (4) it reflected systematic research; and (5) it fit within Swanson's (1998b) definition.

First, we followed the search methods of Sleezer and Sleezer (1997) to find sources of current research studies. Using the same electronic databases, 46 relevant articles were found. To identify references to HRD research studies that were not contained in the databases, we also obtained the appropriate issues of the journals and searched their tables of contents. Since the time of the Sleezers' study, additional search tools have become readily accessible. Previously, CD-ROM compilations offered the most complete and available means of indexing. Today, the internet includes a wide variety of searchable databases in real time for academic and professional journals. To broaden the scope of inquiry, we chose Article First because of its comprehensive nature and its ready access to the academic and professional community. The keywords that we used in the searches were derived from human resource development topics and subject matter. They included human resource development, human resource, training, change, self-efficacy, mentoring, organizational change, teams, performance, learning, intervention, profitability, evaluation, cognition, conflict, burnout, cynicism, interdependence, assessment, appraisal, commitment, decision-making, perception, volunteer, and transfer. Article First identified approximately 70 additional articles as potential sources of HRD research. Of that number, 20 were found to fit Swanson's definition, and were analyzed further. The data collection from all sources resulted in 66 relevant articles from 23 journals (see Table 1).

We used multiple resources to identify which journals were refereed. These included: The Serials Directory: An International Reference Book, (1995) 9th ed. Vol. V.; Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (1998) Vol. 5; R. R. Bowker's Magazines for Libraries 9th ed.; Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Education, Vol. II., 3rd ed.; Cabell's Directory of Business and Economics (1990) 5th ed. Vol. 1-3; and Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Management and Marketing (1997-1998) 7th ed. Vol. 1-3. In addition, we examined some journals. For example, Performance Improvement Quarterly was not listed as refereed in any of these sources. However, examining the journal's contributor guidelines confirmed its status as a refereed publication.

Categorizing the Articles

The researchers read and classified each article according to its subject, research methodology, research participants, and publication venue. Next, the researchers (a) compared the journals for the collected articles with the list of core journals identified by Sleezer and Sleezer (1997); (b) classified the collected articles using the four types of research and the two tools cited by Arnold (1996); (c) classified the articles according to the organizational nature of the group studied; and (d) classified the articles according to their keyword identifiers. Choices were made about categories based on personal judgment. Disagreements on classification were resolved by consensus. The quality of the articles was not considered as a factor.

Data Interpretation

Completing this step involved considering the results of this study relative to Sleezers' (1997) and Arnold's (1996) work. Articles were also categorized based on the context for the study. First, we compared the journals that published HRD research in 1997 with the list of 18 journals identified by Sleezer and Sleezer (1997). Twelve of the 18 journals published relevant articles in 1997. These included: Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ), Performance Improvement Quarterly, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Personnel Psychology, Journal of Applied Psychology, Organization Development Journal, Human Relations, Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal, Public Personnel Management, Public Administration Quarterly, and the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. Table 1 shows for each journal the number of articles published in 1997 and the number of articles published for the years 1990-1994.

Table 1.
Journals That Published HRD Research Articles

Journal	Number of HRD Research Articles Published 1997	Number of HRD Research Articles Published 1990-1994*
Human Resource Development Quarterly	7	23
Journal of Organizational Behavior	7	12
Journal of Applied Behavioral Science	5	2
Journal of Vocational Behavior	5	
Group & Organization Management	4	
Human Relations	4	7
Journal of Applied Psychology	4	10
Organization Development Journal	4	8
Performance Improvement Quarterly	4	14
Industrial Relations	3	
Organization Studies	3	
Personnel Psychology	3	12
Public Administration Quarterly	2	10
Public Personnel Management	2	15
Academy of Management Journal	1	9
Academy of Management Review	1	6
Applied Psychology: An Int'l Review	1	
Educational Psychology	1	
Human Resource Management	1	
Journal of European Industrial Training	1	
National Productivity Review	1	
Organizational Dynamics	1	
Training Research Journal	1	

* Sleezer & Sleezer (1997) p. 188.

The reader should note that the table must be interpreted cautiously because the two studies differed in several important ways (e.g., they relied on slightly different definitions of HRD, looked at publications over different amounts of time and used different references in determining whether a journal was refereed). Nevertheless, the comparison is still suggestive. Over time some, but not all of the Sleezer's (1997) core journals continued to publish HRD research, although not necessarily at the same rate. Other journals were added to the original group.

Second, we classified the relevant 1997 articles using the categories identified by Arnold (1996) that included four types of research (i.e., field or lab experiments, descriptive case or field studies, library research or speculative, and theoretical model or instrument construction) and two tools (i.e., qualitative and quantitative). The results for the 1997 articles were as follows: 13 field or lab experiments; 43 descriptive case or field studies; 8 library research or speculative; and 2 theoretical model or instrument construction. Table 2 depicts the relative percentages for each category in 1997. In this study 12% were library research/speculative as compared to Arnold's finding of 35% for the Academy of HRD Proceedings; 65% were descriptive case/field studies as compared

Arnold's 53%; 20% were field/lab experiments as compared to Arnold's 7%; and 3% theoretical model or instrument construction as compared to Arnold's 5%. The table highlights differences in use of specific research methods, especially, the decrease in field or lab experiments and the increase in library or speculative and descriptive case or field studies. This table should be interpreted cautiously because of the differences in article selection and reviewer characteristics.

Table 2:
Percentages of Research Articles by Type

Research Type	Articles in Arnold's Study*	Articles in 1997
Field or Lab Experiments	7%	20%
Descriptive Case or Field Studies	53%	65%
Library Research/Speculative	35%	12%
Theoretical Model or Instrument Construction	5%	3%

*Arnold (1996) p. 819

Next, the articles were classified by their reliance on qualitative or quantitative tools. The classification revealed that 21 articles of the 66 articles, (32%) relied on qualitative tools and the remaining 45 articles (68%) relied on quantitative tools. The articles that relied on quantitative tools were classified according to Arnold's (1996) list of quantitative methods of analysis that included: factor analysis, Chi square, ANOVA, correlation, means, proportions, variance and none. Of the 45 articles that used quantitative methods, most included simple measures such as means and variance. Some used more than one complex measure. Thirty-two used correlations, seven used ANOVA (analysis of variance), three used factor analysis, and two used Chi square.

Third, the articles were divided into categories according to the type of participants in the various studies. Ten categories were identified: government; business/industry; education; military; medical; professionals; unknown; mixed across business, educational, and governmental lines; financial; and proprietary education. Analysis showed that the majority of the research focused on 22 business and industrial, 9 governmental, and 9 educational institutions. The remaining categories together accounted for only a total of 26 articles (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of Studies by Participant Source

Business/Industry	22
Education	9
Government	9
Unknown	8
Mixed across business, educational, and governmental lines	5
Financial	4
Military	3
Medical	2
Professionals	2
Proprietary education	2

Discussion

This study provides a picture of the current state of HRD research. First, there is a broad spectrum of refereed journals which publish HRD research. Within HRD, numerous subspecialties overlap with such fields as industrial psychology and business management. Journals in these specialties are increasingly available sources of HRD research articles. Practitioners searching for practical information must be made aware of these sources if research is to get into their hands for application in the field. Likewise, HRD researchers may want to broaden their consideration of journals for article submission.

Second, the study results suggests that journals do not remain static in the number of HRD-related articles they publish. For example, when the Sleezers (1997) looked at the top five journals for publication between 1990 and 1994, they found that other than HRDQ, journals that focused on personnel and performance were prime sources for HRD articles. Even then, the numbers were not high. This study suggests a shift in the journals that lead in publishing HRD articles. It also suggests an increase in the number of HRD articles for most journals published higher numbers. There are a number of possible reasons for this shift. There may have been more research in specific areas (e.g., organizational development) than was previously conducted and consequently more submissions. Also, there may have been shifts in the popularity of certain areas of research. Using Arnold's (1996) categories, little theoretical research appeared in the literature in 1997. Field studies and experiments dominated, and different journals had preferences for certain types of subject matter and methodology. Their editorial policies in this regard were probably a factor in the number and type of articles they published in any given year. These findings point to areas for further research. It might be useful to conduct an annual analysis of HRD articles so that trends in research and publication can be reliably ascertained.

With regard to the criteria examined by Arnold (1996), there seems to be movement toward a "systematic observation" type of research. The dramatic drop in library or speculative articles suggests that empiricism and statistical quantitative studies are becoming used more frequently. More studies used complex measures, (e.g., almost half of the quantitative studies were correlational). It is possible that the differences are due to the nature of what is deemed appropriate for publication versus what is presented for conferences because of the interests and needs of the intended audiences.

One factor that must be considered in interpreting the data is the difference between the scope of the earlier studies and the present one. For example, the Sleezers (1997), because of their definition of HRD, excluded research studies which were conducted in educational institutions and those which involved participants who were not directly part of a specific workforce. This may account for some differences in the results. Our study did not exclude such research, as long as the scope fit Swanson's definition of HRD. While there were only 9 educational institutions out of 66 such articles, they account for approximately 14% of the total number of articles. To some extent, differences between the results for this study and previous studies may be attributed to the chosen definition of HRD, and the criteria and method used in selecting articles.

As in other types of disciplined inquiry, there are limitations to this study. The processes used to collect and analyze data influenced the results in number of ways. For example, a different definition or other search mechanisms might have produced another group of articles. A variety of definitions were reviewed before one was selected as the criterion for the study. The databases were also a significant factor. There are potentially other databases available either on-line or in CD-ROM which might have yielded additional articles. No attempt was made to specifically access international journals, although those which were referenced within the selected databases were surveyed. The databases themselves could not be assessed for accuracy, and they possibly contained omissions which could affect the results. Keywords are the means of accessing information within the databases, and there are other relevant keywords which could have been chosen. Some might have produced results that are missing here. In addition, there are unavoidably biases among the researchers themselves which affect the outcome.

Conclusions

As the profession increasingly comes into its own, it appears that more HRD research was published in 1997 than in previous years, and the research appeared in a wider variety of journals. In addition, it appears that the relative proportions of research types published in 1997 differed from Arnold's (1996) findings. Whether these changes represent a permanent shift remains to be seen.

As a result of reviewing the foundational studies on HRD literature and designing the current one, several issues arose which need further study or clarification. These include the change in rates of publication of HRD articles in various journals and the definition of HRD.

One issue is the observed change in the publication rate of HRD articles in journals from associated fields. This study pointed to the existence of the changes, but not the underlying reasons. Such reasons for shifts toward or away from HRD research are currently speculative. Future studies could determine why certain publications have increased or decreased their publication of HRD-related articles. For example, what role does editorial policy play in article selection? Is the change related to the quality of the articles themselves in terms of either the writing or the research? Are HRD researchers failing to submit articles to particular journals, or has the overall submission rate increased? If so, why? Answers to such questions would give greater depth to the insights contained in this study.

A premise of this study was that the field of HRD has coalesced from scattered beginnings within a variety of related fields. As a mature profession, HRD should now be subject to a more concise, coherent definition. In the opinion of the researchers, a useful definition must include the variety of subject matter and processes which make up the profession. It must also be able to exclude what is not relevant as well as delineate what is. This study used

Swanson's definition, although five other definitions were considered. Some definitions were far too broad, while others were too narrow. In particular, the Sleezers (1997) specifically excluded educational institutions. They reasoned that such research often concerned teacher or educational training, which is usually not considered to be within the purview of HRD (C. M. Sleezer, personal communication, September 8, 1998). This position, however, ignores the types of research studies conducted within educational institutions that deal with HRD processes. Our study showed that valid HRD research was conducted in educational institutions. For example, such research articles dealt with theories of learning styles in work settings, transfer of training, negotiation skills, and training issues. Consequently, we believe educational institutions have a role to play in HRD.

Another rationale for the exclusion of studies in educational institutions was that the subjects were students rather than adult workers. This ignores several realities of modern college education. In today's world, adult workers or managers are a greater part of student bodies. HRD subject matter and processes have direct carry-over to adult workers and applicability to the workplace. Also, educational institutions frequently have entire academic disciplines that deal with issues related to HRD. Business, psychology, and human resource development are departments where relevant studies are conducted. Some of these studies are done at the request of employers on work-related topics and use students or mixed groups as the subjects. The researchers do not suggest that every training study generated by an educational institution is within the scope of HRD. Discrimination is needed in looking at studies from educational institutions, but to exclude them wholesale is to lose an entire body of work which could benefit practitioners.

We have already noted that one of the results of this study is the conviction that a more concise and comprehensive definition of HRD might be developed. Based on insights derived from the range of topics in the literature and the various existing definitions, the following definition for HRD is offered to serve as a basis for further discussion and conceptualization of the profession:

> HRD is defined as the purposeful organized development of adult worker proficiencies for individual, group and organizational performance. The focus is on knowledge, skills and abilities which foster technical, business, interpersonal and intellectual competencies.

Only a few studies on HRD literature exist. More consistent and frequent research on HRD publication is needed in order to stay abreast of the profession's development. This study extended earlier studies, expanded the database, and added a new inquiry into participant source. Similar research conducted annually would be useful to the HRD profession.

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